

Guidelines for egg washing for small flock owners

Household poultry flocks may produce a high percentage of dirty eggs. Many of these eggs are soiled because they are laid in dirty nests or are being laid on the floor. Dirty eggs can be a health hazard if they are not properly cleaned and sanitized.

The best control method is to prevent soiling of the eggs. We can't stop the production of floor eggs, but we can keep them to a minimum if we start training the flock early. When the pullets are 16 to 18 weeks of age, let them have access to nests during the day. Provide at least one nest for each four hens. In the evening remove all birds from the nests and close the opening so that the pullets cannot re-enter them for overnight roosting. Nests should be opened again in the early morning. These steps will get the pullets in the habit of using nests. Persistent floor layers can be trained by picking them up and putting them on the nest.

Gather eggs at least three times a day. The longer you leave eggs in the nest the better their chances are of being broken and fouling the nest. Gather them twice in the morning and once in mid-to-late afternoon. Nests should be cleaned once a week to remove dirty litter and manure. Replace the soiled nesting material with clean straw or shavings. Frequent gathering and clean nests are the keys to producing clean eggs.

Even under the best of conditions, some dirty eggs will still be produced. These eggs should be placed in a separate container at gathering time so they can't soil clean eggs. The dirty eggs can accumulate with each gathering, but must be cleaned at the end of the day. This helps to prevent hardening of the dirt and reduces the chance of microbial penetration of the shell.

Dirty eggs should be washed in water that is at least 20°F warmer than the eggs. A good water temperature should be no more than 120°F and no less than 110°F. Hands in rubber gloves can tolerate these temperatures. This water temperature causes the egg contents to expand and prevent entry of microbe contaminated water through the shell pores. Wash each egg separately. If you have only a few eggs (12 or less) wash them under the water tap. Larger numbers of eggs require greater attention. Make up basins of detergent and rinse water, each containing 1 to 2 gallons of solution. Use a non-foaming, unscented detergent, such as automatic dishwasher or laundry detergent. The fragrance in scented detergents will be absorbed by the eggs, giving them an off-flavor or odor when eaten. Change the detergent and rinse water after cleaning each 3 to 4 dozen eggs. Do not soak the eggs before or during cleaning. Each egg should be rinsed in clean water,

After washing the eggs, they should be sanitized by dipping or spraying. To dip, make up a basin containing 1 to 2 gallons of 120°F water and bleach at 100-200 ppm chlorine. A 200 ppm chlorine solution can be made by mixing 1 oz bleach with 1 gallon of water. To spray eggs, a watering can with 120°F water and bleach at 100-200 ppm is good. Don't stint; use plenty of water. This gets them cleaner, and the bleach helps make the stains go away.

Dry the eggs in some responsible manner. They'll stick to the cartons if you box them while wet. Some people dry them on racks, using 1/2 in. hardware cloth on a wooden frame. Putting the eggs directly in the refrigerator, still in their baskets or washer flats, is the simplest method. The

refrigerator will cool and dry them at the same time. Don't be alarmed if some parts of the egg seem darker than others; the parts of the egg that are in contact with a flat or another egg will dry more slowly than the exposed portions, and will look darker. This will vanish when the egg is completely dry.

An even simpler method of egg washing is as follows for eggs to be used for personal consumption: Fill a metal bucket with 160F (70 C) water and a little unscented dishwasher detergent. This water is hot enough to scald you, so be careful. Slowly pour the water over a basket full of eggs, allowing the water to go down the drain. Don't let the eggs stand in the water or they'll cook. That's it. The water is hot enough to sanitize the eggshells without added chemicals. This method doesn't work as well as one where the eggs are individually washed, but it ought to be okay on eggs that are only lightly soiled. It's certainly simple, provided you have an adequate supply of very hot water. **CAUTION:** 160F water is hot enough to scald you, and pouring a bucketful over yourself is not an experience you'll forget in a hurry. If eggs are to be used for retail sales, a chemical method of sanitization must be used.